Give Young People the Sex Education They Deserve

U.S. schools are really missing the mark when it comes to addressing HIV.

July 29, 2019 By Christine Soyong Harley

This “Back to School” season, parents and students alike are caught in a whirlwind of school supply shopping, bus schedule coordinating and wrapping up summer reading assignments. But as families across the country prepare for the upcoming school year, there is one subject that they often fail to consider: sex education.

When it comes to sex education in the United States, we are failing our young people every day. Less than 40% of high schools and only 14% of middle schools across the United States meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s essential requirements for sex education. And when it comes to addressing HIV within sex education classes, we are really missing the mark.

For example, in North Carolina, state law forces educators to teach that a “mutually faithful monogamous heterosexual relationship in the context of marriage is the best lifelong means of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.”

Sadly, North Carolina’s mandate is not unique. The Trump administration has poured millions of dollars in federal funding into this harmful and ineffective abstinence-only approach in communities all across the country. These programs, now being called “sexual risk avoidance,” withhold vital information about condoms and contraceptives and, instead, feature shame-filled lessons that exclusively aim to prevent young people from having sex. They compare sexually active youth to dirty toothbrushes, chewed up pieces of gum, and cups of spit.

These programs should be providing young people with medically accurate information about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) — explaining what they are, how they can be prevented and what treatment options are available today. Instead, they peddle misinformation about the effectiveness of condoms, leaving the impression that condoms can’t protect against STIs and HIV (despite the reality that they can, and do). Studies have shown that students who receive abstinence-only lessons are just as likely as their peers to become sexually active before marriage but less likely to use condoms and contraception when they do have sex.

If these programs mention HIV and other STIs, it’s often associated with a display of terrifying close-up photos of extreme outbreaks. The intention is to warn students, “if you have sex, this will

happen to you.”

This approach is not only irresponsible, but it downright endangers young people’s health.

It’s 2019. We need to stop using HIV as a way to scare young people away from having sex. Instead, we should provide them with honest and objective information about HIV prevention and treatment so that they are as informed as possible when they do choose to become sexually active.

When we give young people accurate, inclusive and empowering sex ed, we can help eliminate the stigma surrounding sexuality — and HIV in particular. Imagine if young people learned early on that no, you cannot, in fact, get HIV from a toilet seat. Or that anyone can get HIV, not just certain groups or types of people. Or that people who are living with HIV can manage their viral loads to a point where they are incapable of transmitting HIV to anyone else.

Fortunately, there is some progress being made when it comes to adequately addressing HIV in sex ed. For example, last year, the Fairfax County School Board passed a measure to teach high school students about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as part of their family life education curriculum.

And while we’re hopeful that other communities are working to make similar advances across the country, we need to do better. The federal government should prioritize and fund programs that teach young people accurate, up-to-date information about HIV as part of their sex education. That should be the standard — not propping up an ideologically driven approach that withholds critical information and puts our children’s health at risk.

At SIECUS, we work to advance sex education policies at the federal, state, and local levels. That’s because policies dictate what can (or cannot) be taught in the classroom. And anyone can take action, right now, to understand their community’s sex ed policies and take the steps needed to change them for the better. Check out our Community Action Toolkit to learn how.

Knowledge truly is power. And education is an effective method of prevention. So let’s use this back to school season as an opportunity to tell schools to provide young people with the sex education they not only need but have a right to receive.

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